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Skopje (EPISCOPIÆ IUSTINIANA PRIMA) – Episcopal Metropolis of Macedonia in the Old and Middle Ages

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sir Arthur J. Evans revisited

Macedonian Rightfaithful Church – Ohrid Archiepiscopacy

Macedonia is homeland of one of the oldest churches in the world – Ohrid Archiepiscopacy (i.e. Patriarchate), successor of *Justiniana Prima*, the third ever officially enthroned autocephalous church in the world, descended in today modern Macedonian Rightfaithful Church - Ohrid Archiepiscopacy (MPC-OA). The Macedonian Rightfaithful Church (Makedonska Pravoverna Crkva) by succession is one of the first four Ancestral Apostolic churches.¹ The bible testifies that in Macedonia was baptised the first ever christian on European soil – Lidia from Philipi. In the Macedonian Jerusalem, Ohrid, is the ultimate Holy See of the old Ohrid Patriarchate Archiepiscopacy, and honorable platea of the first known university in Europe – St. Clement's University on Plaošnik. Ohrid Patriarchate Archiepiscopacy from 1019 until 1767 found itself subdued under the auspices of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople. Thenceforth, in 1767, it was uncanonically forbidden by the Turkish occupation authorities, and has passed the following decades in illegality. It was officially restored as from 1859, by nomination of Partenie Zografski (1820-1876) for Kukush-Poljanski bishop/episcopope. This was the first triumph of the renewed indigenous Macedonian Rightfaithful Church - Ohrid Archiepiscopacy in modern times.

In the past Macedonian Rightfaithful Church - Ohrid Archiepiscopacy had under its jurisdiction as much as 32 eparchies. But lets turn back in the ancient times to the very beginning of the story...

After 4 long Macedonian-Roman Wars, after nearly two centuries long struggle and strategic battles, defeats and victories, in 148 B.C.E. Macedonia was finally defeated by Rome, and large number of Macedonians, together with their king Persei and immense plundered treasure, were taken as prisoners of war to Rome and other different parts of the Roman empire. Furthermore, the Romans (by sword and flame) forced from Macedonia across the Danube an estimated 300.000 Macedonians, in order to prevent the possibility of Macedonian people to reenact the claim on their empire as it was during the reign of Philip and Alexander. What was left of the European part of

¹ In explaining the official position of the Roman Catholic Church regarding the primacy of christian churches in Eastern and Western parochies, Roman Pope Nicholas I (858-867) in the distant 859 said: "*Roman curia for true churches considers only those which were established by apostles, such as the - Macedonian, Roman, Antiochian and Aleksandrian church. Although the church clerics of Constantinople and Jerusalem call themselves 'patriarchs', however, that's without meaning, because they are not regulated by the apostles.*"

Macedonian empire was divided once again into several parts. Skopje, or *Skopis* (lat. *Scopis/Σκοπις*, as the city was noted back then in the colloquial Latin language of the Roman Empire)², as one of the greatest settlements was also separated from the Macedonian region of *Agriania* (in Upper Macedonia).



Above: **The territory of the Agrianes (rounded in red) in 6-5th century B.C.E. according to dr. Victoria Sokolovska**

Bellow: **The territorial distribution of the Macedonian communities and areas in Lower (ΔΟΛΗΑ) and Upper (ΓΟΡΗΑ) Macedonia in the time of Philip II of Macedon.**

² Compare Jornandes' *Sirmis, Syc.* In Ravennas the form "*Scupis*" occurs, cf. *Londinis, Syc. Historia* VII.2 (Bonn ed. p. 272): Τὰ γὰρ Ζαλδαπὰ καὶ Ακουὶ καὶ Σκοπις ... etc. „Antiquarian Researches in Illyricum. (Parts I & II)", sir Arthur John Evans. p. 140.

may have been a time when, as the later ecclesiastical arrangement indicates, Skopje was the political Metropolis of *Dacia Mediterranea* which included the later separated *Dardania*.

In the *Notitia* itself *Dardania* continues to be reckoned along with *Dacia Mediterranea* and *Ripensis*, *Moesia Prima*, *Praevalitana*, and a part of *Macedonia Salutaris*, as one of the "Five Dacias" which had now replaced the "Three Dacias" of original Trans-Danubian province."⁴

Skopje became administrative, cultural, economic and religious center of the entire region. In the year AD 313, following the Edict of Milan, it became the seat of the episcopate. The full extent of the Roman colony in *Skupi/Scopis* is largely unknown, even after significant archaeological excavations. More recent excavations by the Museum of Skopje have uncovered parts of the city wall (much damaged) with two towers and early Roman residential construction from the 2nd and 3rd century. The wall is roughly 12 m high and 3,6 m thick.⁵ They also concluded from the identified remains that the outer limit of the urban area was far bigger than suspected. But it is obvious, as indicated by later church documents, that there was a long period of time when Skopje was the central political and christian metropolis in the Roman provinces in Macedonia and the larger area of Balkan, as clearly shown in many different maps that describe the administrative subdivision of the Roman Empire in those times:



⁴ „Antiquarian Researches in Illyricum. (Parts I & II)” by sir Arthur John Evans, p. 139.

⁵ <http://archaeologica.org.mk/mk/zanimlivost.php?id=2048>

Scopis (Skopje). Here he dates an edict (a new law), and mentions the city again in AD 388.⁶

The continued importance of this city as a Roman military stronghold appears from the *Notitia Imperii*, when the mobile army units from Skopje (lat. *Comitatenses Scupenses*) are mentioned among the reserve units (*Legiones Pseudocomitatenses*) under the command of the *Magister Militum per Illyricum*.⁷ It occupied the central juncture of one of the most important ancient routes in Macedonia *Via Axia*, or the „Axis Road“, which name can be detected from the Latin name for the river Vardar (*Bardarios*) – *Axios* (Axis), along which valley goes an ancient corridor (and further north continues through river Morava valley), a branch of *Via Egnatia*, which was and still is the chief route between the middle Danubian region and the Aegean Sea (also *Belo More* – „White Sea“ in Macedonian). *Via Axia* was connected to *Via Egnatia* at Solun (Thessalonica), and passing through *Stobi* (then capital of *Macedonia Secunda*)⁸, *Scopis* (Skopje), continues to north into *Moesia*, where it was connected to *Via Diagonalis*.⁹

„During those times when the Balkans were undivided by ethnic and ideological cleavages, these roads represented the nerve centres of this unity, this ecumene. The anonymous pilgrim who described in AD 333 the *Itinerarium Burdigalense* found organised roads in the Balkan, complete with places where he could rest, refresh himself and change mounts.“¹⁰

Up until AD 379 – date of a decree by Gratian – civil administrations in Dacia and Macedonia were part of the Western Empire and were only effectively separated from the West during the partition between Valentinian II and Theodosius. Centrality and strategic importance of Skopje Diocese is seen in the letter of bishop John in AD 492 to Pope Gelasius. Quote: „It appears, namely, from the letter addressed in 492 by John, Metropolitan of Scupi, to Pope Gelasius, that in his quality of Bishop of the metropolitan city of Scopi, "*Episcopus*," as he styles himself, "*Sacrosanctæ Ecclesiæ Scopinæ, Metropolitanæ Civitatis*," he claimed a supremacy not only over the Bishops of *Dardania* in its contemporary official sense but over other Bishops who sign beneath him, one of whom was Bonosus, Bishop of no less a place than Serdica, the capital of *Dacia Mediterranea*. In view of this fact the letter addressed by Gregory the Great in 595 to Felix, Bishop of Sredets (Latin: *Serdica*), enjoining him to obey his superior, and the Pope's vicar, Johannes, Bishop of *Justiniana Prima*, acquires a fresh significance. In 553 we find from the Acts of the Fifth Synod of Constantinople that the Bishops of Naissus and Ulpiana had refused to attend and sided with Pope Vigilius, and when

⁶ Cod. Theod. *De Palatinis* 1.2, dated "*Scopis*". „Antiquarian Researches in Illyricum. (Parts I & II)" by sir Arthur John Evans, p. 128.

⁷ „Antiquarian Researches in Illyricum. (Parts I & II)" by sir Arthur John Evans, p. 132.

⁸ „DACIA MEDITERRANEA & MACEDONIA SECUNDA IN THE 6th CENTURY: A QUESTION OF INFLUENCE ON CHURCH ARCHITECTURE" by Carolyn S. Snively, p. 219.

⁹ *Via Diagonalis* or *Via Militaris* (both names are modern, but the first is more indicative as well as more practical) was another very important artery connecting the East with the West, leading from Constantinople through today Bulgaria, Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Slovenia, to Italy and Rome. What has been proven is that the *Via Diagonalis* from *Carnuntum* on the Austrian Danube was connected directly to the *Amber Road*. „Overland Balkan Routes in the Middle Ages" by Fabrizio Vanni. Centro Studi Romei of Florence.

¹⁰ „Overland Balkan Routes in the Middle Ages" by Fabrizio Vanni. Centro Studi Romei of Florence.

appealed to on the subject refer the synod to their Archbishop Benenatus.”¹¹

On the map of Pevtinger (*Tabula Peutingeriana*, 4-5 century) Skopje is marked by the two towers of the city's *Praetorian Gate*, as an important station on the ancient Roman road. These antique 'highways' are fully functional to this day: if traveling by land – one still leads all the way through today's Albania to Drach (*Durrës*), and other through Nish and Belgrade to Illyria (B&H, Croatia and Slovenia) and to present-day Italy. According to the Table, the *Via Egnatia* connected back to the *Via Diagonalis* at a common end point and had no direct links with Constantinople.

Justinian I the Great, an East-Roman emperor instaured the Metropolitan Episcopacy *Justiniana Prima* in Skopje in AD 535 of the 6th century, as a central cushion capital, meant to withstand the growing renewed influence of old Rome and its church.¹² In A.D.535, in his law *Novella 11*, titled *De privilegiis archiepiscopi primæ iustinianæ or Concerning the rights of the archbishop of Justiniana Prima*, Justinian honored his birthplace by establishing there an archiepiscopal see, and he defined the status and jurisdiction of the new archbishop. This law constituted an attack against the power of the archbishop of Solun and through him against the Pope in Rome. Emperor describes it in his *Novela* as part of the province *Dacia Mediterranea* and in *Novella 11 – Macedonia Secunda* was listed among the territories subject to the archbishop of *Justiniana Prima*. Catelianus, the newly created Archbishop of *Justiniana Prima*, received ecclesiastical jurisdiction over the provinces of: 1) *Dacia Mediterranea* itself (hence one of the arguments is that *Justiniana Prima* was located in *Dacia Mediterranea*), 2) *Dacia Ripensis*, 3) *Moesia Secunda*, 4) *Dardania* (which was actually a part of *Dacia Mediterranea*), 5) *Praevalitana*, 6) *Macedonia Secunda*, and 7) part of *Pannonia Secunda*, i.e., he acquired ecclesiastical jurisdiction over the *Diocese of Dacia* with minor additions.¹³

It is important here to note, for the sake of argument, the wrong assumption of the Serbian scholars which tend to promote the archaeological site of *Caričin Grad* as the possible location of the *Justinijana Prima*! If, however, construction at *Caričin Grad* began only after *Novella 11* was issued in the year AD 535, it seems quite likely that the city would have been a busy and confusing construction site for at least a decade after 535.¹⁴ Procopius tells us that: „...*beyond the borders of Epidamnians, very near the castle called Baderiana, is the district named Tauresium, from which the Emperor Justinian, the re-founder of the Roman world, drew his origin. Here the Emperor erected a small quadrangular castle with a tower at each angle, from which it was called "Tetrapyrgia," and near it he built a most glorious City, which he called Justiniana Prima.*“

Episcopacy *Justiniana Prima* generally was the third consecutive autocephalous archiepiscopacy in absolute after the first two: Rome in Italy and the City of Constantine "New Rome" (Latin: *Consantinopolitana Nova Roma*), which already, through the centuries passing, gained their recognitions as administrative centers of Eastern and Western church respectively. And like Rome

¹² Skopje flourished under the reign of Justinian I the Great, born Upravda, son of Istok (see Jovan Dragašević , GEOGRAPHY, 1871; p.114), from the nearby village of Taor (*Tauresium*).

¹³ „DACIA MEDITERRANEA & MACEDONIA SECUNDA IN THE 6th CENTURY: A QUESTION OF INFLUENCE ON CHURCH ARCHITECTURE” by Carolyn S. Snively, p. 216.

¹⁴ „DACIA MEDITERRANEA & MACEDONIA SECUNDA IN THE 6th CENTURY: A QUESTION OF INFLUENCE ON CHURCH ARCHITECTURE” by Carolyn S. Snively, p. 218.

and Nova Roma (Constantinople) was instaurated at the spot where there was already previous big city and administrative center.

CIRCS CONSTANTINOPOLITANA NOVA ROMA.



Ten years later, in AD 545, emperor Justinian ordered the jurisdiction of the church in Skopje to be put under the competence of the *Diocese of Rome*, and the archbishop of *Justiniana Prima* was promoted into a papal vicar, probably due to the mostly Latinized character of the then population in Skopje, but also because the obvious intention to put under his direct control the growing influence of the church in Rome. Lets not forget – during the rule of Justinian I the Great, Rome was in a subordinate position, basilicas with a baptisteries were built by him in Ravenna, and as far as the Tharros in Sardinia, and Eastern Roman Empire ruled from Constantinople the entire Mediterranean and Asia Minor. A related issue is that the majority of churches in the province(s) of Macedonia, with a few exceptions earlier and later, were built between AD 460 and the middle of

the 6th century.¹⁵ But, old Rome has slowly recovering from the devastations suffered in 410, 455 and 476,¹⁶ when the last emperor of the West Roman empire, Romulus Augustulus was deposed and city of Rome was repeatedly sacked and destroyed, especially by the Vandals and Visigoths.



Above: **Part of the ancient Roman Aqueduct of Skopje**

Skopje of that time is de facto and de jure the largest city in Macedonia and beyond, with many urban structures scattered all around. Nearby is the village of Taor (*Tauresium*) – the birthplace of Justinian, then there's the old Roman military "*Tetrapyrgia*" watchtower, or so-called "*frurion*" Baderiana, and the big old fortress *Crnche* (today popularly known as "*Marko's Towers*") on

¹⁵ „DACIA MEDITERRANEA & MACEDONIA SECUNDA IN THE 6th CENTURY: A QUESTION OF INFLUENCE ON CHURCH ARCHITECTURE” by Carolyn S. Snively, p. 217

¹⁶ In the AD 5th century the ancient Roman empire has finally crumbled, and the last emperor of the West Roman empire, Romulus Augustulus, was deposed. The city of Rome was repeatedly sacked and destroyed, especially by the Vandals, Visigoths and Franks. Italy was retaken from the barbarians under the rule of Justinian I the Great in AD 554, when the last Franks were defeated in the battle of *Casilinum*, North Italy.

Mt.Vodno.¹⁷ Beside those there are the ruins of ancient *Scupi*, then the fortress of Kale in the central hill above the downtown Skopje, as well as the ruins of another big fortress, again on the slopes of Mt.Vodno, on the locality called *Sovce*. Wherever there's a construction works – some old structure, old walls, basilicas, etc. sprung under the ground. Many of these structures were destroyed due to two catastrophic earthquakes that hit the city of Skopje: one back in AD 518, and another in 1963.

Under jurisdiction of the Metropolitan Bishop of Skopje Diocese (i.e. *Justiniana Prima*) in different times or all together were the: episcopacy of Nish (*Naisus*), episcopacy of Sredets (today *Sofia*) – at one time the capital of the Roman province of *Dacia Mediterranea*; episcopacy Ulpiana (*Justiniana Secunda* on Kosovo Pole), episcopacy of Ratiaeria Danubiana, episcopacy of Bitola (*Episcopia Bouteleos*), Solun's Diocese of Aegean Macedonia (*Macedonia Secunda*), and Kutmichevica Bishopric (*Praevalitana* , present-day central Albania). So, Metropolitan bishops in Skopje covered the area from the Adriatic coast on the West - to the Mt. Haemus (Stara Planina) on the East, and North from the Danube - to the south in Thessaly.

Skopje Diocese *Justiniana Prima* due to assimilation, separatism and discrepancies of the various eparchies that once belonged to her, and under the pressure of the Mongolian and other barbarian invasions from the north, in 602 moved to Ohrid and became known as *Ohrid Archiepiscopacy*. During the reign of Tsar Samoil Ohrid Archiepiscopacy grew even bigger and more influential, due to the renewed relationship with the Roman papal state, and also because of the Bogomils¹⁸, which became constituent part of the Samoil's state church on the territory of Macedonia. But the growing and renewed power and independence of the Macedonian Rightfaithful church was cruelly interrupted by the Eastern Roman Emperor Basil II (he too born Macedonian in Adrianopole), who destroyed Samoil's empire, and put once again the Macedonian church with all its eparchies under the control of Constantinopole. Thus, the Archiepiscopacy of Ohrid was re-founded in the year 1018, after the collapse of Samoil's Macedonian state, and the emperor Basil II issued three bulls to this end, passing over to this very large Archiepiscopacy the thirty-two ecclesiastical provinces in all, including: 1.Ohrid-Prespa eparchy; 2.Kostur eparchy; 3.Vutron eparchy in southern Arbania; 4.Iraklis (Bitola) eparchy with Pelagonia, Prilep,Veles and Debar; 5.Meglenska eparchy; 6.Strumica eparchy with Radovish; 7.Morodvis with Maleshevo; 8.Velbužd (today *Kyustendil*) eparchy; 9.Sredec (*Sofia*); 10.Nish eparchy; 11.Branichevo eparchy along the Morava valley with Smederevo; 12.Belgrade (*Singidunum*) eparchy; 13.Srem eparchy; 14.Skopje eparchy; 15.Prizren eparchy; 16.Lipljan eparchy with Kosovo Pole; 17.Ras eparchy; 18.Belgrade (*Berat* in today Albania) eparchy; 19.Vidin eparchy; 20.Kozil eparchy; 21.Orosh eparchy west of Prizren;

¹⁷ The Old Skopje acropolis was destroyed in the catastrophic earthquake in AD 518. And it is from this period that the city migrated from its old site to the new. The old position of Skopje with its broad plain reflected the characteristics of the ancient civilized age, when the cities were built in the flatlands. But the character of the times has changed drastically. As the Mongolian invasions followed - the age of medieval castle building had begun, and strong natural positions, the peak and the promontory, were sought for civic foundation.

¹⁸ The first actual Protestant church in Europe. Severely oppressed and persecuted as equally condemned and excommunicated by both Eastern-Rightfaithful and Western-Catholic church. See: THE MACEDONIAN GENIUS THROUGH THE CENTURIES by Giorgio Nurigiani.1972, p. 64,67,68. Also: The Bogomils: A Study in Balkan Neo-Manichaeism" by Dimitri Obolensky. 1948, p.151,259: "From the combined evidence of geografigal factors, of indirect historical data and of later sources, which must now be examined, it is possible to prove that the cradle and subsequent stronghold of Bogomilism in the Balkans was Macedonia."

22.Drinopole eparchy in Arbania near Argirocastro; 23.Imer eparchy in Arbania north of Corfu; 24.Glavenitsa eparchy with Devol and Kutmichevitsa; 25.Janina in Epirus; 26. Stash eparchy in Thessalia 27.Vels eparchy south of Drinopole; 28.Srbica eparchy southwest of Solun (Thessalonika); 29.Ber eparchy west of Solun; 30.Trnovo eparchy; and finally – 31.Chernica eparchy with Dürres, whit the last episcope of Durrës under the auspices of Ohrid Archdiocese mentioned in the year 1280.



Above: The Ohrid Patriarchate with its eparchies in AD 1020

A very large independent archiepiscopal see was thus created, and subordinate only to Constantinople.

Καὶ τὸν ἐπίσκοπον Βουτέ-
λεως εἰς τὴν Πελαγονίαν καὶ
εἰς τὸν Πρίλαπον καὶ εἰς τὴν
Δευρέτην καὶ εἰς τὸν Βελεσσόν,
κληρικούς τε καὶ παροίκους τε.

Above: Excerpt from the Chrysobull of the East-Roman emperor Basil II (born in Macedonia) from 1019, with quote: "*To this bishop of Bitola and of Pelagonia and Prilep with Devretia and Veles ...*", Museum of the City of Bitola

The next big blow to the Macedonian Rightfaithful Church and Archdiocese, in accordance with the animosity and blessing by the Roman-catholic church, came with the Ottoman invasion in the 14th century. Succeeding of the historical events throughout the centuries had left deep traces and far-reaching consequences on Skopje and Ohrid Archiepiscopacy. Metropolitan Episcopal Skopje as Macedonian christian center gradually lost its former position and importance. Along with it from the historic scene disappeared also the *Justiniana Prima*, which, according to recorded data of many sources, and relatively recent researches committed by the renowned English archaeologist sir Arthur J. Evans – is still buried under the old Turkish bazaar in the center of Skopje.



Above: The Macedonian National Theatre (in front) and Kale Fortress before the 1963 earthquake

Below: *Kurshumli-An*, ancient East-Roman structure that miraculously survived until our days, readapted into a small bazaar. It can be still observed and visited in downtown Skopje



